Online Ethnographies

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Research Methods Festival
“Applying the insights, methods, and perspectives of ethnography to this class of issues is a terrifying and delightful challenge for what some would call the information age.” Susan Leigh Star, 1999

“The philosophies and criteria of different researchers need to be different, improved, and ever-changing. Build your own vessel. Stage your own show. Evaluate your own evaluation.” Robert V. Kozinets, 2010
Stand-alone literature review (Okoli & Schabram, 2010)

Many different versions of online ethnography have recently been suggested. To clarify the nature of these approaches, a literature review with several phases was conducted¹:

1. As a starting point we chose Robert Kozinets’ (2010) Netnography. Employing backward search, more references were found.
2. A keyword search in the (main) electronic databases: Science Direct, EbscoHost, Inderscience, ACM Digital Library, and Springer Link
3. Further searches with Google Scholar
4. Search words: netnography, online ethnography, virtual ethnography, ethnography of Internet, cyberethnography, webnography and digital ethnography. These keywords had to occur in the title, as keywords, and/or in the abstract section
5. 14 approaches were identified as applications of the ethnographic method deployed in various disciplines

¹Isomäki, H. & Silvennoinen, J. 2013.
Results

On a general level it can be said that the approaches share the six strengths of good quality Internet research (Baym, 2006, p. 82):

1) grounded in theory and data,
2) demonstrate rigor in data collection and analysis,
3) use multiple data collection strategies,
4) take participants’ perspectives into account,
5) demonstrate awareness of and self-reflexivity regarding the research process, and
6) consider interconnections between the Internet and the situated life world

However, regarding the change process from traditional to online ethnography, especially in terms of 1) ICT as a field, 2) researcher’s immersion in a field site, 3) learning and using the local vernacular, and 4) detailing of elements in fieldwork (cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; 2005; Kozinets, 2010), we became interested in the approaches’ relation to ICT, reflected also in research object and researcher position.
## Online ethnography approaches 1/2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Main authors</th>
<th>Relation to ICT</th>
<th>Research Object</th>
<th>Researcher Position</th>
<th>Research Procedures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Ethnography</td>
<td>For instance, Geertz, 1973</td>
<td>F2F, offline</td>
<td>Cultures and communities</td>
<td>Participant - observer</td>
<td>Combining different methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netnography</td>
<td>Kozinets, 2010</td>
<td>Online &amp; offline</td>
<td>Online (offline) cultures and communities</td>
<td>&quot;Apparent&quot; participant-observer</td>
<td>Phased method through 6 steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connective Ethnography</td>
<td>Dirksen, Huizing &amp; Smit, 2010</td>
<td>Online embedded to offline and vice versa</td>
<td>Social dynamics in local physical context with online context</td>
<td>Online &amp; offline participant observation; long term</td>
<td>Traditional methods blended with online research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connective Ethnography</td>
<td>Fields &amp; Kafai, 2008, 2009; Hine, 2007</td>
<td>Moves between online &amp; offline</td>
<td>Virtual communities, support groups, e-science</td>
<td>Active, towards holistic understanding; long term</td>
<td>Multiple sources of data through connection of different spaces</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mediated Ethnography</td>
<td>Beaulieu &amp; Estalella, 2009; Beaulieu, 2004</td>
<td>Online &amp; offline through technologies</td>
<td>Internet, traces of links, hits and hyperlinks</td>
<td>Participant-observer</td>
<td>Contiguity and traceability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Digital Ethnography</td>
<td>Wesch, 2009</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Vlogs</td>
<td>Long term active participation, &quot;friending&quot;</td>
<td>Creation of videos, discussions, interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Digital Ethnography</td>
<td>Murthy, 2008</td>
<td>Added to offline research</td>
<td>Digital Video, Social networking websites, Blogs</td>
<td>Covert participant-observer</td>
<td>Questionnaires &amp; email interviews</td>
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</table>
## Online ethnography approaches 2/2

<table>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Digital Ethnography</strong></td>
<td>Masten &amp; Plowman, 2003</td>
<td>Online &amp; offline</td>
<td>Mobile communities connected to sites</td>
<td>Lurker; swift analyser of multiple digital data</td>
<td>Many digital techniques; participant observation by participants</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Cyberethnography</strong></td>
<td>Rybas &amp; Gajjala, 2007</td>
<td>Online &amp; offline worlds</td>
<td>Social network environments &amp; virtual communities</td>
<td>Long term involved participant-observer</td>
<td>Epistemology of doing, observing the physical environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cyber-Ethnography</strong></td>
<td>Ward, 1999</td>
<td>Online &amp; offline as hybrid space</td>
<td>Online interactions for instance in chat-rooms</td>
<td>Participant observer</td>
<td>Reflexivity, semi-structured interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Webnography</strong></td>
<td>Puri, 2007</td>
<td>Online (offline)</td>
<td>Blogs, chatrooms, discussion boards</td>
<td>Lurker, “a part of furniture”</td>
<td>Digital collection of text-based consumer data</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Virtual Ethnography</strong></td>
<td>Hine, 2000</td>
<td>Online &amp; offline</td>
<td>The shaping of virtual communities</td>
<td>Emerging participant-observer</td>
<td>Field connections, intermittent engagement</td>
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<td><strong>Network Ethnography</strong></td>
<td>Howard, 2002</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Network field sites</td>
<td>Active or passive participant-observer</td>
<td>Social Network Analysis</td>
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<td><strong>Multi-sited Ethnography</strong></td>
<td>Wittel, 2000; Green, 1999</td>
<td>F2F, traditional &amp; virtual ethnography combined</td>
<td>“Real people” &amp; virtual space</td>
<td>Participant-observer Online &amp; Offline</td>
<td>Multiple objects and fields of study</td>
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Conclusion

ICT as a field

- ICT as a field defines the boundaries of online ethnographic studies:
  1. the relationship between a community of users and ICT network (online/offline activities and their comparisons),
  2. the relationship between a community of users and single ICT application (how the application shapes/enables/restricts interactions/culture formation within the specific environments) or
  3. By recognising the possibilities for various mediated practices offered by ICT applications and network functionalities that users take into use (how people come to grips with technologies; “doing design ethnography”; technology development)

- Boundaries of research need to be constructed by ethnographers in doing ethnography: need to follow the social dynamics and users’ way to use applications in the context of research (theory/practice; cf. Hine, 2008)
Conclusion

Online immersion

- Different technologies shape the nature of online communities/interactions various ways
- Holistic view of online life worlds can be gained only if understood how participants utilise/interpret all features of the online environment (‘interpretative flexibility’ of ICT applications (Pinch & Bijker, 1987))
- Ethnographers need to reflect on the technological environments’ qualities which enable, restrict or shape participants’ and their own engagement to the community or interactions (part of learning the local vernacular)
- Important to understand what is the social design of the ICT application and what is participants’ interpretation and local use of the design (part of detailing the elements in fieldwork)
Online researcher position and immersion to the field: subjective/intersubjective User Experience (UX)

How to understand technology-mediated lifeworlds online?

**SOCIAL ICT DESIGN**
- Tagging
- Activity streams
- Presentation of users’ current status
- User profiles
- Comments
- Rating & votes
- ”Gift giving”/endorsement

**SOCIAL ONLINE ACTIONS**
- Social browsing & search (finding people)
- Interaction/communication actions (incl. lurking)
  - Sharing content
  - Collaboration
  - Trust building
- Empathy expression

**UX**

participants

researcher
References & reading


Thank you!

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